DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 352 204 PS 021 034

AUTHOR Rambusch, Nancy McCormick
TITLE Montessori's Flawed Diffusion Model: An American Montessori Diffusion Philosophy. Occasional Paper. Series One.
INSTITUTION Princeton Center for Teacher Education, NJ.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 6p.; Paper was made possible by a donation from the J. Seward Johnson, Sr. Charitable Trust.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Diffusion (Communication); Early Childhood Education; *Educational Methods; Educational Philosophy; *Information Dissemination; *Intellectual Property; Models; *Montessori Method; *Ownership; Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS *Montessori (Maria); Montessori Schools

ABSTRACT

This paper contends that Maria Montessori had a negative effect on the diffusion of the Montessori method in the United States. Throughout her life, Montessori held to the belief that her thoughts and their expression remained her exclusive intellectual property. She therefore tried to exert as much control as possible over the training of teachers in her methods and the establishment of Montessori schools. The main flaw of this approach was that teachers versed in her method were invited to see themselves as independent contractors, not as teachers working with other educators in the community. After the second World War, Nancy McCormick Rambush and a number of educators in the United States who admired Montessori's educational methods but not her restrictive personal control established an American Montessori movement. This American Montessori movement supported: (1) the critical role of parents as first teachers; (2) American Montessori education as a plurality of possibilities, not as a single orthodox iteration of Maria Montessori's thought; and (3) a reevaluation of the process of transmitting Montessori's message, in which insights on the Montessori method in America are seen as coming from those who receive the massage, not those who send it. (MDM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED352204

An occasional paper of the

Princeton Center for Teacher Education

Series One

An American Montessori Diffusion Philosophy

Montessori's Flawed Diffusion Model

Nancy McCormick Rambusch

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Marsha Stencel

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

PS 021034

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

An American Montessori Diffusion Philosophy

Montessori's Flawed Diffusion Model

Nancy McCormick Rambusch

Like many purveyors of original insights, Maria Montessori held to the belief throughout her life that her thoughts and their expression remained her exclusive intellectual property. Correlatively, she believed that the circumstances surrounding the practice of the "method" associated with her name ought to be controlled by her personally. Thus did a cenacle of her disciples organize the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) in 1927 to insure that this would happen. In effect, Montessori developed an international franchise system for her educational ideas, managed by the AMI, in her name.

Montessori expressed her professional intentions publicly in her first book on work done with the San Lorenzo slum children, *A Method of Scientific Pedagogy* as applied to Infant Education and the Children's Houses. Anne George's American translation of the book jettisoned its cumbersome title which was both shortened and changed. It became *The Montessori Method* (1912), and was no longer identified as the method of Scientific Pedagogy earlier described. Apparently Montessori both liked the ring of the new title, and lived and worked subsequently by its implications. Where Montessori had begun her work as a disinterested researcher, open to the free inquiry of fellow researchers in the fields of physical anthropology, pediatric psychiatry and psychology, she diffused her educational work in a proprietary manner. One could argue that at the moment Montessori consented to have her "method" identified as her personal property, her ultimate effectiveness as an educator was compromised. One clear effect of her franchise strategy was to keep her work outside the orbit of serious educational discussion for almost half a century. Another was to provide her followers with a flawed diffusion model.

Montessori's proprietary lock on her ideas and their expression caused consternation and puzzlement to Americans interested in her work on at least two separate occasions. When S.S. McClure, editor of *McClure's Magazine*, arranged an American tour for Montessori in 1913, it was his intention to participate in some kind of American training effort, once Montessori's ideas become better known in the United States. McClure's enthusiasm for

One could argue that at the moment Montessori consented to have her "method" identified as her personal property, her ultimate effectiveness as an educator was compromised.

Montessori's method as a "best selling" commodity had been heightened by the favorable reception accorded an article on her work which had appeared earlier in his magazine. En route to America with McClure, Montessori apparently had second thoughts about his ambitions and reasserted the exclusivity of her insights in what proved to be a habitual pattern.

Retrospectively considered, a far greater miscue on Montessori's part occurred when she rebuffed the cooperative efforts of Alexander Graham Bell and his wife to establish a Montessori teacher training facility in the United States. Bell's new global import in Montessori's work. One can only speculate on the effect such a collaboration might have had, since Montessori was enraged that the Bell's would consider moving forward to implement such a project, without her express permission and presence. As a result of Montessori's reaction, the Bell's abandoned their interest in an American Montessori education (Rambusch, 1992).

The path Montessori trod in spreading her ideas is one well known in western culture. Donald Schon calls it the "center-periphery" model of innovation diffusion (Schon, 1964). It was used effectively by the Roman army, by Christianity and by Communism. It begins with an acknowledged leader gathering a group of chosen, uncritical disciples committed to the "work." These fan out to the antipodes of the known world with the "message." The converts stay connected to the center of the enterprise by standards of internalized "orthodoxy" supported by a hierarchical organization. This diffusion strategy, necessarily asymmetrical in character, considers the natives to be in need of the missionaries' message. From the missionaries' perspective, the only freedom the natives enjoy is in accepting the message, not in reformulating it.

If such a diffusion strategy is to work, the following conditions must be obtained:

- The message must be fully articulated before it leaves the "center."
- There must be enough energy at the center to serve all of the peripheral points.
- The center must be mindful of information coming back from the periphery and act upon it to modify the central message.

If these conditions are not met, "implosion" occurs, wherein the center collapses in on itself and the peripheral points are left to fend for themselves. Think of it as closing down the home office and leaving the branch offices to their own devices. Insufficient energy at the center, too many commitments to distant peripheral points, an unwillingness to accept feedback from the periphery, all spell disaster.

Apparently, it was Montessori's perception that if she, in her lifetime was not merely "at" the center of her enterprise but was "the" center, then whatever shifts in doctrine occurred could be managed easily as her further thoughts on the subject. Her sole proprietorship of the diffusion network further insured orthodoxy, because only she would determine who, among her disciples, was worthy to transmit her doctrine in Montessori's lifetime. This plan of action, coupled with the effects of her isolation and two world wars, severely restricted the global impact she had hoped to have. However, she was able to manage what became in fact, a successful family business devoted to teacher training in her "method," and upon her death bequeathed that business, the AMI, to her son, Mario.

Montessori's strongly individual style appealed to Americans with their national penchant for "going it alone." Yet, an unanticipated long- term effect of Montessori's diffusion strategy was the flawed message of quasi-proprietorship given to the American teachers following her method. Each teacher, charged with diffusing "the method" to a particular group of youngsters, was invited to see herself as a free standing individual, in relation to Montessori's thought and to its implementation, not as a teacher working together with other teachers in community. From the late 1950's on, American Montessori schools were typically composed of groups of teacher who perceived themselves as independent contractors, loosely confederated under a head teacher or an administrator. Where other alternative educational methods, parent cooperatives, teacher collectives and Waldorf educators paid close attention to implementation of ideas in community, Montessori clearly never conceived of collegial support as either necessary or relevant. Thus, inadvertently, did she sow seeds of dissention and dysfunction as shadow elements in the implementation of her pedagogical messages. Paradoxically, one of the appeals of the Montessori method as an American public school alternative may well rest on the aforementioned flawed insight of Montessori. In the typical American public elementary school, teachers are historically just as isolated and free standing in their self-perception, as are Montessori teachers through their training.

In the late 1950's and 60's, those of us central to the development of the American Montessori movement busied ourselves establishing an indigenous network of schools and teacher training programs. We focused on implementing Montessori's message in an American setting, rather than on analyzing Montessori's diffusion strategy. Montessori herself eschewed specification of the particular cultural conditions under which her method flourished, claiming it could flourish under a diversity of conditions. We had no quarrel with the "deposit" of Montessori truth, that is, the method as a complex of insights and strategies. We felt free to shape and interpret the contextual conditions in which schools would be situated in the creation of the fledging American Montessori movement, three peculiarly contextual articles of faith animated our work:

(1) The critical role of parents as the child's "first" teacher and as important collaborators with teachers in children's education.

(2) American Montessori education as a plurality of possibilities, not as a single "orthodox" iteration of Montessori's thought and

(3) the contextualizing and ultimate transforming of Montessori's insights in America as rightfully coming from those receiving her "message," not those sending it.

This last was particularly important. Whereas the first failed efforts at bringing Montessori education to America were those of Montessori herself and a few faithful American disciples, like Anne George and Helen Parkhurst, the second impetus, which led to a stunningly successful institutionalization of Montessori's "method" came about through my going to Europe, getting the "message" in the form of AMI teacher training, and bringing it back as an American among the Americans who would ultimately implement and diversify it.

As a result of the inadequacy of Montessori's diffusion model for an American audience, an American Montessori diffusion strategy necessarily developed. This model, based on partnership, is not one of transmission alone, but of transaction. Montessori, critical of the annihilating effects of authoritarian childrearing, utilized that same authoritarian model in transmitting her message. She considered the receivers of her message as blank slates upon which she would write the salient word. The American Montessori response to Montessori's diffusion model was to develop one much more congruent with her educational philosophy. This model paid appropriate attention to the receiver of her message as already possessing a life history worthy of consideration and incorporation into the receiver's iteration of American Montessori education. ❖

References

Montessori, Maria, *The Montessori Method*, New York: Frederick Stokes, 1912.

Rambusch, Nancy M., "Montessori in America: A History" in Loeffler, Margaret (Ed.) *Montessori in Contemporary American Culture*, Portsmouth, NH Heinemann, 1992.

Schon, Donald A., *Beyond the Stable State* New York: Harper & Row, 1964.

Nancy McCormick Rambusch

Nancy McCormick Rambusch is credited with the reintroduction of Montessori education into the United States, after the Second Word War. Dr. Rambusch founded the American Montessori Society in 1960, and the first American Montessori Teacher Training program shortly thereafter. During her tenure as President of the fledging group, she was involved in the establishment of more than 400 American Montessori schools. She is credited with the reformation of the Montessori method for the American audience.

Dr. Rambusch is currently a professor of Early Childhood Education at the State University of New York/College at New Paltz. She also serves as Director of Staff Development of Princeton Center for Teacher Education, Princeton, NJ.

Princeton Center for Teacher Education

PCTE, established in 1989, is a program of the Princeton Montessori Society, a not-for-profit educational organization. Its purpose is twofold. First, the center provides education for adults who are pursuing careers as Montessori teachers on both the Infant and Toddler level and the Preprimary level. PCTE does this by integrating quality academic and practical instruction through the experience and observation of an on-site laboratory school, the Princeton Montessori School. This model school educates children ages birth through adolescent.

In addition to this "first level" training, PCTE recognizes that Montessori training on all levels, Infant and Toddler, Preprimary, and Elementary, is only the first step in the teacher's professional growth process. Therefore, PCTE's second purpose is to bring together experienced teachers who want to develop and expand their understanding of Montessori philosophy as a result of years in the classroom. PCTE has begun this teacher education on the elementary level by conducting seminars for experienced elementary teachers who learn how to construct their own culturally relevant curricular path, and to develop strategies for implementation. Teachers discuss obstacles preventing them from optimizing their classroom environments and receive help in a more effective facilitation of children's learning. The emphasis of these seminars is on the exploration of each teacher's environment in its own cultural setting through participation and involvement in an elementary teacher network.

• • • • • •

This publication was made possible by a donation from the
J. Seward Johnson , Sr. Charitable Trust.

PCTE welcomes your comments on this paper or thoughts regarding the diffusion of American Montessroi education. For further information about seminars amd publications contact:

Princeton Center for Teacher Education
Ginny Cusack
Director of Teacher Education
487 Cherry Valley Road
Princeton, NJ 08540
Phone: (609) 924-4594
Fax: (609) 924-2216

PCTE
Princeton Center for Teacher Education
487 Cherry Valley Road
Princeton, NJ 08540